

2 #BLM: A Movement Conquers the Web and the Country

Black Lives Matter, or in short BLM, was founded by activists Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors – its “Holy Trinity” (WILLIAMS 2015, p. 510) – in 2013/14 as a reaction to the high number of deaths of Black people at the hands of police in the US (DUNHAM & PETERSEN 2017, p. 342). It is, by its own description, a “decentralized network, enhanced by social media, with no formal or designated hierarchy, elected leaders or prescribed structure” (HOWARD 2016, p. 101). The second-last characteristic echoes both an observation by Barbara Ransby (2017) and statements by Ella Baker, member of the famous activist organizations or events *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC), *Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee* (SNCC), and *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP). Ransby notes that the movement does not have a leader like the CRM of the 1960s, but Baker holds that if people show strength and determination themselves, strong leadership might not be quite as necessary (RANSBY 2017).

Different academic works dealing with BLM mention the names of those Black people who have died in the founding year and the following ones, such as *Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics*, written by Juliet Hooker (HOOKER 2016). When listing several names, she asserts that the US are unfortunately no way near a “discernible end of the tragic parade of the unarmed black dead” (HOOKER 2016, p. 449). Russell Rickford explains how BLM has emerged: as a hashtag, #BLM respectively #blm, on the social network and messenger platform Twitter (RICKFORD 2016, p. 35), but also on Facebook (for person, see THE DEPARTMENT OF

HISTORY n. d.). Garza had written an emotionally charged, appealing letter, posted by Cullors with ‘#BlackLivesMatter’ (HOGAN 2019, pp. 130, 131). Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson has emphasized the defining impact of this letter on the Black community and its identity (HOGAN 2019, p. 131; ALL AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT SPEAKERS BUREAU n. d.).

The concrete case leading to the movement’s founding was the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in the town of Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012 (MUNRO 2015) by George Zimmerman, a “self-appointed neighborhood watch ‘leader’” (SALTER & ADAMS 2019, p. 299) with mixed heritage of Peru and Germany (MUNRO 2015). He had a biased view of Martin, assuming he would be about to commit a serious crime. This preconception led him to call law enforcement. Despite the assigned dispatcher clearly telling him not to pursue the teenager on foot, Zimmerman did – allegedly to verify his location (MUNRO 2015; SALTER & ADAMS 2019, p. 299). This was followed by a violent confrontation in which Martin was killed by Zimmerman’s gun. When officers got to the scene, Zimmerman described the boy as his aggressor, even if he only held “a bag of skittles and a can of iced tea” (SALTER & ADAMS 2019, p. 299) in his hand. Wesley Hogan says this very situation reveals a reality: It is that “if you happen to be Black, the most basic of activities can get you killed in today’s America” (HOGAN 2019, p. 125; for person, see CENTER FOR DOCUMENTARY STUDIES n. d.).

The confrontation was a moment in which Zimmerman used his gun to defend himself. Defense by force is legal in Florida according to a law referenced in the debate: the ‘Stand Your Ground Law’, solidified in a Statute. However, the law only becomes valid “when and to the extent that the person reasonably believes that such conduct is necessary to defend himself or herself or another against the other’s imminent use of unlawful force” (SIDLEY AUSTIN LLP n. d.; ONLINE SUNSHINE 2021). Moreover, the deadly force that occurred here is only legal when wishing “to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another or to prevent the imminent commission of a forcible felony” (SIDLEY AUSTIN LLP n. d.; ONLINE SUNSHINE 2021). Both cases clearly do not seem to apply here, as Martin did not threaten force. Some people might claim that the so-called “castle doctrine” – the defense against outside

threat from inside a home – can now be applied anywhere via the Statute, which is technically true. However, the rights under the law were not put into effect in Zimmerman's case, because he did not wish to participate in a hearing before the actual trial (MUNRO 2015; SIDLEY AUSTIN LLP n.d.). Ultimately, no proof was presented that showed other facts or realities, and Zimmerman was released. After initial charges, search for further evidence, and a long trial, Zimmerman was proven not guilty by the jury (MUNRO 2015; RICKFORD 2016, p. 35; HOGAN 2019, pp. 125, 126).

People who support the BLM Movement wish to underline a variety of issues. They seek to bring systemic racism, police brutality – in Rickford's (2016) words "state violence" (RICKFORD 2016, p. 36) – and the general situation of African Americans and other Black Americans onto the public and political stages. More strategically, they strive to resolve the urban-periphery, rich-poor, equal-unequal, and several other societal cleavages (derived from the cleavage theory by LIPSET & ROKKAN 1967). A prominent topic inside these broader ones is the American prison system and the disproportionate share of African American inmates. BLM supporters believe that each Black life matters, regardless of the existence of any prior criminal history, or even conviction evidence (HOOKER 2016, p. 465). In other words, the movement aims at "reshap[ing] the dialogue about race, class, and the criminal justice system" (FRANKLIN 2016, p. 10).

The paragraph's last sentence underlines that adherents believe in the social concept of intersectionality, meaning that they are willing to include people of all genders, backgrounds, sexual orientations, or religions (KRAMER, REMSTER & CHARLES 2017, p. 23; HOGAN 2019, p. 133; see also LINSKOTT 2017). With this approach, BLM could "redraw geographic, demographic, and conceptual lines of anti-racism advocacy" (SMITH 2020). Intersectionality, then, automatically accounts for diversity (see RICKFORD 2016, p. 35). Among supporters, one finds not only students, but also "fast food workers, civil rights organizations, religious groups, celebrity recording artists and athletes" (LAWRENCE III. 2015, p. 386; see BURCH et al. 2020). The most prominent example of this latter group is Colin Kaepernick, a Black American Football player who knelt first in 2016 during the US National Anthem to protest the brutal killings of Blacks in the US by police (JENKINS 2020). His repeated posture sparked, or rather

re-energized, what is worldwide known as the ‘Take a Knee Movement’ (see BBC 2020). People have recognized, BLM founder Opal Tometi says, that “it’s happening to black women and black men” (TEUSCHER 2015) in many different daily life situations. She and her fellow founders Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors “can’t imagine that we live in a day and age where our progressive community isn’t taking on these issues of racial justice” (TEUSCHER 2015).

To show this progressivism, and to voice their anger and discontent, people engage in country-wide protests. These should make others, thus Whites, recognize and stop the “dehumanization of black life” (HOOKER 2016, p. 463). More specific is the observation by Charles R. Lawrence III. (2015) in *The Fire This Time: Abolitionist Pedagogy and the Law*. He writes they employ their chants, signs, and specially designed clothing to express “their hurt, rage, sorrow, deep sense of loss, and shared injury” (LAWRENCE III. 2015, p. 386). These feelings underline the emotional appeal included in the actions. Further, the protests are an obvious manifestation of what Rickford (2016) terms “creative disturbance” (RICKFORD 2016, p. 36): Everything BLM organizes has the intention to disrupt daily life to a certain degree to gain attention, such as the so-called die-ins, where people lay on the street without bodily movement. Those actions, much like protests, do “dramatize the killings of Blacks by law enforcement officials” (FRANKLIN 2016, p. 10), used in a metaphorical way to illustrate the pervasive brutality. Hence, it is about sending a common message to institutions, to politics, and ultimately to society about how they wish to be treated. In Civil Rights Era 1960 parlance, which still can be adequately used today, the hashtag and the protests are part of “consciousness raising” (HOGAN 2019, p. 132). Importantly, when the title of Beer’s (2018) article asks: ‘Do Black lives increasingly matter?’ he says that “the greatest outrage and protest mobilization” (BEER 2018, p. 90) were caused by incidents in which Black citizens who did *not* carry arms were killed by law enforcement, as seen with Trayvon Martin. Therefore, supporters speak of police brutality.

Hooker (2016) mentions that subsequent “racialized politics of solidarity” (HOOKER 2016, p. 449) bring about opinion differences, as will be shown further in this thesis. She says some dismiss protest as vio-

lence-driven riots, whereas the protesters themselves speak of uprisings. These views continuously clash, because the opponents are appalled by the violence, by burning and stealing things, while many participants claim violence happens out of enormous desperation (HOOKER 2016, p. 449). What thus becomes evident is, on many Whites' part, a criminalization of protesters based on race and skin color (see HOOKER 2016, p. 463). However, these were by far not the only critiques, as Hooker (2016) states. On page 456 of her work, she demonstrates some aspects in opposition to BLM. These are an unpromised pledge to non-violence, showing (quite ironically) a degree of disrespect to Black identity characteristics, not having a clearly organized structure or leadership, and not bringing forward in policy terms what they would like to achieve. Especially the first aspect convinced many Whites that racial injustice condemned by BLM was virtually non-existent, and thus the protests were not an issue to take too seriously (HOOKER 2016, p. 456).

From these explanations, important contextual and analytically fruitful information can be extracted: The mechanisms BLM concentrates on were summarized by Charles 'Chip' P. Linscott in 2017 (see MCCLURE SCHOOL n.d.). In his *Introduction: #BlackLivesMatter and the Mediatic Lives of a Movement*, he writes that BLM's characteristics are "purposefully disruptive protests, peaceful civil disobedience, mainstream political activism, and mass demonstrations" (LINSCOTT 2017, p. 76).

Additionally, it can be recognized that BLM from the start has three important functions: "an affirmation, a declaration, and an exclamation" (NELSON 2016, p. 1734). This important categorization was used by Alondra Nelson (2016) in her article *The Longue Durée of Black Lives Matter*, published in the American Journal of Public Health, or AJPH (see NELSON n.d.; SSRC n.d.). Even if she did not explain her differentiation in the AJPH article, it is useful to think about the elements: The slogan *Black Lives Matter* is an affirmation as it emphasizes the importance of Black people in today's American society, a declaration because it is a statement or an exigency, and an exclamation because people use it as a chant during protests. As a repetitively used slogan, it is "an act of self-affirmation" (WAYNE 2014, p. 126) and a "political demand" (WAYNE 2014, p. 126) at the same time, comparable to the historical 'Black Power!' by the Black Pan-

ther Party. Furthermore, the described characteristics and motivations of BLM offer the possibility for two important considerations.

First, BLM has a clearly discernible geographic dimension, and second, it can be regarded as a social movement. The geographic nature of BLM is manifested through its very emergence on social media. An important work here is the article *Social Movements in Urban Society: The City as A Space of Politicization* by Byron Miller and Walter Nicholls (2013). As it explains, social media is sometimes termed one of a few “geographically extensive networks” (MILLER & NICHOLLS 2013, p. 464). Self-proclaimed *Affrilachian* (Black Appalachian) Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson sees social media as *the* defining factor besides protests: She says social media “gives us a space to tell our truths in our own voices. It gives us a space to actually practice what it is to center the most marginalized voices” (WOODARD HENDERSON 2018, cited in HOGAN 2019, p. 144; further, HOGAN 2019, p. 131; ALL AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT SPEAKERS BUREAU n. d.). Nevertheless, digital organizing, Henderson (2018) warns, should not be a complete substitution for real-life organizing (see HOGAN 2019, p. 144). Further, geography can be found in the way BLM conducts its actions. Protests are dispersed all over the country, they do not only take place in metropolitan areas (see HOGAN 2019, p. 131). People, like alluded to earlier, disrupt daily practices by occupying or blocking streets and facilities, denying the movement in space to others – cars, public transport, and pedestrians. All actions, but especially the protests, are “powerful collective spatial expressions” (ALLEN, LAWHON & PIERCE 2018/2019, p. 1004). Additionally, Alicia Garza asserts that what BLM did after emergence was to “[open] up space for new organizing” (HOGAN 2019, p. 134), making possible new solutions and new approaches. Furthermore, different realities in different parts of the US, as well as demographic diversity, have over time constructed a “world with multiple senses of place and multiple geographies within the same space” (ALLEN, LAWHON & PIERCE 2018/2019, p. 1003). This is especially true if we look at African Americans and their relations with Whites and other races. Those people feel differently about certain places, but in one space – such as a city – there can be more than one trend of socio-geographical imagination and identification. However, there is another important aspect.

BLM is often seen as a social movement. In the article *The Urban Question Revisited: The Importance of Cities for Social Movements*, Walter J. Nicholls (2008) defines social movements as follows: They are characterized by actions of many people coming together to counteract and change current politics “through non-traditional means” (NICHOLLS 2008, p. 841). In this sense, BLM is a social movement as it seeks to impact national socio-political decisions and behaviors through protest. Thereby, it hopes to reach a change in power relations and variables connected to it, such as the economy, politics, and – indeed – geography. Further, there is another important factor for movement formation: a significant impact of psychological elements, as the quote by Linscott (2017) about issues such as “shared injury” indicated earlier.

A concept explained in *The Urban Question Revisited* is “soft’ infrastructure such as trust, norms, symbols, identities and emotions” (NICHOLLS 2008, p. 844). Besides those, Nicholls (2008) speaks of so-called “relational qualities” (NICHOLLS 2008, p. 845), which are essentially the same as soft infrastructure, but complemented by “interpretive frameworks” (NICHOLLS 2008, pp. 845, 846). For BLM’s adherents, these patterns are crucially important. It could be termed the ‘psychologization’ of geo-political, societal processes and dynamics. Black people in the US were triggered – though not only – by the brutal killings of Trayvon Martin and countless others. They responded with those substantial protests already described, based on shared tragedy and together with people they can trust. They extended their reach and drew national support, particularly in urban spaces (for explanations, see NICHOLLS 2008, p. 846).

BLM matches alternative explanations of the term social movement, too. The one by Turner and Killian (1987) is adequate, albeit a bit too generalistic. It contends that a social movement is “a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part” (TURNER & KILLIAN 1987, cited in SCOTCH 1989, p. 381). BLM is a collectivity or collective with continuity as it has been around since 2014; it wishes to promote a change in American society because the negative aspects of Black life should be eradicated. A more nuanced, detailed definition is provided by the website ‘Guide 2 Social Work’: Movements are a “voluntary association of people engaged in concerted

efforts to change, attitudes [sic!], behavior and social relationships in a larger society” (GUIDE 2 SOCIAL WORK n.d.). People join in demonstrations and other actions to attempt cognitive reorientations and systemic reconfigurations. This helps fighting the cleavages and negative social development tendencies apparent in today’s American society. As will be outlined further, principles of economic development, resource distribution, and particularly Whiteness and resulting injustice are important. These have proven defining instigators of social movements in history as well as today.

If people’s lives – in this case Blacks’ – are dominated by unease, insecurity, frustration, or disappointment, they are likely to join in movements. The short article of the network cited in the previous paragraph lists several types of movements: According to this list, BLM would most certainly classify as a reform movement. It strives to change some individual conditions in society and does not aim at toppling and replacing the entire social order (GUIDE 2 SOCIAL WORK n.d.).